

INFORMATION

Playing Politics with the Aged

IN THE GAME OF POLITICS, a group that wants to push its own proposal is likely to spend a good deal of time attacking its opponents—and any alternative programs. If the attacks are frequent and violent enough, the opponents will be kept busy defending themselves. And no one is likely to have much time for calm consideration of the group's own proposal.

This at least seems to be the thinking of the Kennedy Administration as it promotes its plan to provide medical care for the aged through Social Security. One of the prime opponents of the proposal is the American Medical Association, so the A.M.A. now is coming under heavy fire.

John M. Bailey, the Democratic national chairman, charged the other day that the national medical group "has stood for years against the social and economic advances that the Birch Society stands against today." In fact, Mr. Bailey contended, "the American people are starting to regard the A.M.A. as an ally of the John Birch Society in a surgical mask." One doesn't have to be a fan of the A.M.A. to recognize this as wild political propaganda.

But the Democrats and the Administration were not through with the A.M.A. A few days later, the President welcomed a group of 27 doctors to the White House. The group read a statement signed by 40 doctors who support the Administration's medical care program, and the President said he hoped this support would convince other doctors of the wisdom of his plan.

A spokesman for the 27 doctors said he didn't know how many A.M.A. members favored the Social Security approach but added that 75 per cent of the 40 doctors who had signed the statement were members of the A.M.A. This is proof positive that at least 30 of the A.M.A.'s 180,000 members are all for the Administration's proposal.

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On the same day, Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare Ribicoff attacked an existing government program of medical care for the aged. The A.M.A. and many other groups and individuals argue that this program, set up by the Kerr-Mills Act of 1960, deserves a fair test before the government embarks on anything as extensive as medical care through Social Security. Under the Kerr-Mills plan, states can set up federal-state medical programs for persons over 65 whose financial resources are limited; the federal government provides at least half of the funds.

So far as Mr. Ribicoff is concerned, the Kerr-Mills plan has already met its test and failed. The findings of a study conducted by his department, he said, "supports the conclusion that to rely on existing public assistance legislation alone as a means of meeting the medical care needs of aged persons would not only fail to cover many aged people in need, but would be very costly in general revenues."

Both Mr. Ribicoff's "study" and its conclusions, we believe, should be scrutinized carefully. The plan is dependent on voluntary action by the states, and state legislatures do not move rapidly. By January, the month on which Mr. Ribicoff's figures were based, 22 states had begun—but had only begun—to participate in the program.

Since January, Mr. Ribicoff concedes, six more states have joined the program. And it is certain there will be others, especially if the prospects for the Social Security program should dim. Any government program, as the secretary certainly should know, tends to grow as time goes along.

And then there's that comment that the Kerr-Mills plan alone would be "very costly." Is Mr. Ribicoff seriously suggesting that it would cost the taxpayers any less to provide medical care for all elderly citizens, whether they need financial help or not, than it would cost merely to care for those in need?

No one we know of is opposing adequate medical care for the elderly. But there is a very real public policy question whether this should be on a voluntary or a compulsory basis. And whatever anyone thinks about that, it's certain there hasn't been time to fairly assess the Kerr-Mills program—or the many new private insurance plans for the elderly.

However smart its politics may be, we can't see how the Administration is serving the interests of the elderly or the public with its propaganda mixture of vilification and distortion.